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TITLE: Increasing Injection Drug User Access to Sterile Syringes Through Increased Pharmacy Sales

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ISSUE: Injection drug use plays a major role in transmission of blood borne infections (BBI) with major public health costs (HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C). Inadequate availability of sterile syringes contributes to BBI transmission among injection drug users (IDUs). Although pharmacy sale of sterile syringes to IDUs could provide widespread access to sterile syringes, several types of laws and pharmacy regulations substantially restrict such sales.

SETTING: United States of America.

PROJECT: We reviewed: (1) Status of laws and regulations restricting syringe sales. (2) Studies of pharmacist's attitude and practices related to syringe sales. (3) Policies of professional organizations.

RESULTS: Laws limiting syringe sales include prescription requirements (8 states) and the drug paraphernalia laws (about 48 states). Pharmacy regulations also limit syringe sales in states. Coordinated action by public health and pharmacy organizations (intended to prevent BBI among IDUs) has led to changes in these laws and regulations in Connecticut, Maine, and Minnesota. Many pharmacists are reluctant to sell sterile syringes to persons who may be IDUs because of laws and regulations. Changes in the laws in Connecticut led to increased pharmacy syringe sales. New policies include: In 1997, American Medical Association advocacy of removal of penalties related to syringe possession and purchase and in 1999, the American Pharmaceutical Association (APhA). "APhA encourages state legislatures and boards of pharmacy to revise laws and regulations to permit the unrestricted sale or distribution of sterile syringes and needles by or with the knowledge of a pharmacist in an effort to decrease the transmission of bloodborne diseases."

LESSONS LEARNED: Recognition of the legitimate medical purposes of sterile syringes to help prevent BBI transmission among IDUs who continue to inject drugs has led to changes in state laws and regulations in a limited number of states. Recent policy positions may help increase the availability of sterile syringes through pharmacy sales.

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